

Interview with Robert Clifton

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Interviewer: Phil Pogue

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Pogue: This is the agriculture school reorganization oral history interview. It's April 29th, 2011; we're in Macomb, Illinois. My name is Philip Pogue and we're interviewing Mr. Robert Clifton, who is a member of the Illini West Board of Education. We're happy to have him with us to answer a series of questions related to the reorganization of several schools in Western Illinois. So, Mr. Clifton, could you give us some background, your family, education, and work experience?

Clifton: I was born with a twin brother, Richard, in the year 1940 in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. My father owned a grocery store, a mom and pop grocery store, in Mount Pleasant. When we were fifteen, my family sold the store and moved to Dallas City, Illinois, where they bought another grocery store. With that grocery store, they put four children through college: myself, my brother, an older sister, and a younger sister. I grew up always wanting to be a teacher. I went to Western Illinois University, trained in chemistry, general science, physics. Accepted my first teaching job as a mathematics and social studies teacher, because those were my minors. Within a period of ten years, I was an elementary and junior high teacher, became principal, then became superintendent. Served seventeen years, I think eighteen years, as superintendent of Dallas City and then took early retirement. I retired for a year, decided that retirement was not what I wanted. I became a principal and executive secretary for the Fort Madison Catholic Schools. While I was there, we began plans of consolidating three area Catholic schools into what is now Holy Trinity. Following that position, I took a position with Saint Ambrose University, working in their special education department and co-operating with the Catholic diocese of Davenport, where we set up, recruited, trained, and directed classroom volunteer tutors for all of the southern Catholic schools in the Catholic dioceses. After a two

year stint there, I decided I would retire again. I was retired about three months when the Keokuk Catholic schools called and asked if I would take over a position that they had. I worked there off and on for two years, first as an elementary school principal and then, when their executive secretary left, I directed the school for a year to a year and a half. Then again I decided it was time to retire. That time I retired for about two months, and just missed the kids sorely. So my wife, who had been a teacher in Dallas City for years, and I decided we would apply to the Midwest Academy, which is a private residential school. We worked as individual student tutors part-time for two years and then, since that time, I have retired. After the convergence, I was asked if I would serve on the board of education for Illini West, and I became a board member. I'm serving my third year as a board member for Illini West.

Pogue: So, your role in the recent merger became more involved when you took over as a board member?

Clifton: Yes. I was an observer and a supporter, but I had no active role.

Pogue: Could you give us a kind of an overview of the impact of districts? You had Carthage #338, you had Dallas City, #336, which you had been a leader in, and La Harpe #335.

Clifton: Yes. I would like to go back a little bit in my history to Hancock County. When I first came to Hancock County, there were eight high school unit districts in Hancock County and, with the support and leadership of the county superintendents of schools, Olen Smith and Dale Haegy, the schools in Hancock County began to talk merger and consolidation. And if it was not for the leadership of those county school superintendents, we probably would not have had any reorganization. Dallas City, the small district that I was in actually consolidated from several elementary schools and one high school. You saw consolidation of Carthage from lots of little schools: Ferris, Burnside, Union, Douglas, a large number of little schools into Carthage unit district. La Harpe, Fountain Green, Durham, all were consolidated into La Harpe. Again, this was with the fine leadership of our county superintendents. Now when the Regional Education Offices came into existence with— trying to think who the first one was—Jack Pickert. I don't think he was the first one, but Jack Pickert and Bob Baumann, Don Simpkins, Gary Eddington. All of these people and Don Meixner now. John Meixner has done much more for reorganization in our small rural area than really any great help from the State Board of Education, or from our educators. So I'm perhaps giving a little push to the regional superintendents. I see the legislature and Governor Quinn actually getting behind and pushing further consolidation openly. Their talking of consolidation. I read their actual actions as working against consolidation. You know, any type of consolidation is going to tax the local tax dollar on transportation. And you see our transportation reimbursement diminishing each year. From my point of view, as a superintendent and now as a board member, the REO or the people that really push and support these local consolidations, these are the people that the voters, the individual voters in the

district, they trust. They don't trust those in Springfield as much, but they do trust their REOs. I see the legislature and Governor Quinn cutting back on transportation costs, which is a brutal cost for any consolidation, and on the REOs, which provide so much impetus and so much support.

Pogue: So you gave a great overview of the history of Carthage, Dallas City, La Harpe, maybe ten years prior to the merger of the three districts into that high school. Did some of these districts co-op to handle some of the problems of a small school, and particularly sports?

Clifton: The Dallas City unit district actually deactivated their high school within this ten year period. They considered going to both Stronghurst School and Nauvoo. They chose Nauvoo-Colusa because it did look to be within the range of where a future consolidation would be. I believe that the La Harpe community district has consolidated sports programs. They actually were in merger talks with West Prairie. Carthage school district, of course, was in the merger talks with, prior to this successful one, included Carthage, Dallas City, La Harpe, and Nauvoo. A Committee of Ten formed, it was put on the ballot. The actual convergence was approved in three of the districts - Carthage, Dallas City, and La Harpe - and was defeated in Nauvoo. The Committee of Ten was, I believe, re-formed for the three, a ballot issue was placed, and the convergence was approved by the three districts of Carthage, Dallas City, and La Harpe. So there had been, almost over the last, well since nineteen eight-five, the first big push for consolidation, there had been talk and conversations between school districts for merger.

Pogue: Now you talked about the deactivation of the high school at Dallas City. What does the term deactivation mean?

Clifton: The term in this context would mean that the school board deactivated or closed the high school and, through a contractual basis, sent high school students—in this case, the Dallas City high school was closed, and the high school students went to Nauvoo-Colusa. The board stayed as a functioning board, as a K-12. But the students were sent to Nauvoo.

Pogue: And the issue of Nauvoo being on the ballot the first time, how much, what length of time was there between the first vote with the four schools and when it was passed with the three?

Clifton: I believe it was within a year. I think it was the shortest time possible allowed under the law.

Pogue: Why was there interest in creating a unified high school, because Illinois had not really done this? And you were using a fairly new law and keeping the elementary as districts?

Clifton: I probably could sum this up by saying when a school closes, the town closes. Now I'm not sure I believe in that, but that's what a lot of people in rural areas believe. That when you lose your school, you're eventually going to lose your town. And

so the convergence issue was an absolute, one-hundred percent guarantee that local areas were going to maintain the elementary schools that existed at the time. It is not a pretty picture, convergence. It goes against current trend, of course, of eliminating staffing positions. We actually went from three districts to four districts. We went from two, three superintendents to four superintendents. But for us, it solved our high school problem. It provided us an opportunity for better schools, wider and better curriculum.

Pogue: You mentioned that the three school districts took advantage of a fairly new law. Who came up with the concept to use that particular model, instead of the more traditional consolidation?

Clifton: I honestly think that you have to credit the three existing superintendents. That would be Dr. Joe Campbell at La Harpe, Charles Langley at Dallas City, and Vicky Hardy at Carthage. And Gary Eddington, the regional superintendent of schools. They were looking to find a way of creating a better education atmosphere. They also were very cognizant of the fact that people were not going to vote schools out of local communities.

Pogue: Was there any interest in any of the other options? You seem to indicate that this conversion seemed to be the only one that would be practical for the voters in those three districts.

Clifton: I think the Committees of Ten that were organized and this group of educational leaders I talked of earlier, Eddington, Campbell, Langley and Hardy, I'm sure they discussed a unit district. I'm sure they discussed convergence. I'm sure they discussed deactivation. You know, this was just not a one-legged stool they were discussing, but this was the best option.

Pogue: Then to complete the reorganization process, a Committee of Ten was formed. Was there any issue, since you were not actually on that committee, tied to how you got representatives from all three communities? Was there any issue with that?

Clifton: I do not believe there was an issue. The La Harpe school board president was Tracy Anders. At the time, the Dallas City school board president was Brent Sparrel. I believe they worked very, very carefully to make sure that each community was involved. The Carthage community, because it was the county seat and there is always difficulty in outlying areas, whether it is jealousy or just some type of innate distrust of people at the county level, they took a modified back seat and allowed the other group to fully take part and to fully express their desires and their needs and what was needed. I just could not speak more highly of the, if you want to call it the executive group, that met and formed and advised the Committee of Ten. You know, it was almost perfect, from what you could see from outside. It was almost perfect, in what they accomplished and what eventually came out.

Pogue: Were there any difficulties with the three school boards on the idea of going the route of conversion?

Clifton: To my knowledge, of course, there were misunderstandings. There was information that was circulated that was not necessarily true. But the school boards themselves, I think almost to a man or woman, were at all Committee of Ten meetings. The Committee of Ten informed the school boards, you know, there was open and constant communication. I do not know of any problem that they came up to that they could not sit down and solve, and did sit down and solve.

Pogue: As far as a feasibility study, was one done?

Clifton: To my knowledge there was not an official feasibility study done.

Pogue: How many public hearings were held on this?

Clifton: There were a minimum of three public school hearings held just to explain what the committee had worked on, what their recommendations were. The Committee of Ten rotated from community to community for over a year. And every one of their meetings were open. Public was invited. Public was asked to talk, express their opinion. And it was obvious when you attended the meetings that the public felt positive about their ability to input at those meetings, because I was part of that public.

Pogue: How many hearings did you go to?

Clifton: I believe I went to three individual meetings and two specific hearings.

Pogue: What seemed to be the dominant questions raised at the hearings?

Clifton: Tax levy. And the reason why. Why do we need to do this? And you know, ninety percent of the discussion led to the fact that it was hoped that curriculum could be improved.

Pogue: Were there any differences in the hearings in any of the communities? Was there more concern expressed at one of the locations as compared to the others?

Clifton: In the outlying districts, La Harpe and Dallas City, there was more concerned expressed about becoming a Blue Girl or a Blue Boy, that's the old Carthage school district. You know, why do we have to give up the La Harpe Eagles and why do we have to give up the Dallas City Bulldogs? I think the teaching staffs were also unsure that they would have jobs. And the Committee of Ten, from the very first, began to give assurances that existing staffs would be maintained as much as possible.

Pogue: When was the referendum date?

Clifton: November 6, I believe it was November 6, 2006. Yes, 2006.

Pogue: And you said that the Committee of Ten had been formed well over a year before that?

Clifton: Yes, this specific Committee of Ten. There had been other Committees of Ten for previous questions.

Pogue: Now, you had indicated that there was an earlier effort with Nauvoo that failed. Were there different questions raised after the Nauvoo defeat?

Clifton: Actually, no. It was close in the Nauvoo community, but the revised Committee of Ten just felt like it was successful in the other three. The people overwhelmingly supported it, and they wanted to get it on the ballot as soon as possible.

Pogue: So the referendum was successful on all three. What was actually on the ballot?

Clifton: It was for a unified high school and three elementary districts, one each in Dallas City, La Harpe, and Carthage.

Pogue: And did it have tax rates?

Clifton: The tax rates had been fixed.

Pogue: Were there rates that went up and rates that went down?

Clifton: Well, all rates went down, but when you added the elementary district to a new high school district, the two rates increased what had currently been.

Pogue: On what official date did the Illini West and elementary boards begin to function?

Clifton: The official date for Illini West? It started unofficially just days after the election, because the new Illini West district had to hire an interim superintendent, we had to get tax levies and budgets passed, and so on. So we acted in a quasi-legal fashion in late November, and started the employment process of the principal and the superintendent, officially and with full—we had some restricted powers as the Illini West board—officially and full empowerment, we started July first, two thousand seven. And the three existing unit districts then became elementary districts on July first, two thousand seven.

Pogue: So, for our listeners, the referendum date was in November 2006. It passed. And, at that time, were board members also selected?

Clifton: Yes. Board members for the new elementary districts and the new high school district were on the ballot and were elected.

Pogue: So then you had a process where the three old unit districts were now...dropped?

Clifton: No. For six months, the three unit districts remained intact for the unit districts. The Illini West school board was an interim school board, which had certain powers by law, very restricted powers. And no financing. We had absolutely no money. But we were authorized and obligated to hire a superintendent, principals and secretaries, in order for us to hit the ground running. On July first, the

elementary districts and the school boards of the unit districts actually terminated. The old unit districts became the elementary districts with new board members, and then they had to hire new superintendents. The high school then became a legal entity, with all the powers or unpowers of a school district.

Pogue: Okay, thank you for explaining that. Were there groups or localities opposed to the reorganization?

Clifton: I think there were very, very limited opposition. No organized opposition. I think senior citizens probably, of which I am one, were afraid of increased tax rates. All people were concerned about the distance students would be on buses, but there was no organized, and certainly no campaign, that was formed anti-convergence.

Pogue: The existing bond debt that the three districts had, how was that dealt with?

Clifton: Now that's not one of these questions. The existing bond debts stayed with the new elementary districts. So the new district was formed with no debt. No assets, but no debt.

Pogue: Was there any difficulty with the phase-out of the three old boards, toward the reorganization of July 1, going from November 2006 to July 1 of 2007?

Clifton: You know, I would say that, because of the year and a half build-up to the successful referendum and so on, that the only thing that you could hear from the existing board members was a huge sigh of relief. And a pat on the back and saying here's your baby, it's all yours now. So I would say no, that it was certainly a very smooth, smooth transition.

Pogue: You mentioned that the regional office played a crucial role in this. The State Board of Education played a more limited role, except probably for the incentives?

Clifton: Yes, the incentive money was there. And it was nice to have. The new Illini board decided that they were not going to spend it, it was not going to be part of the ongoing annual expenditures. So, what that money had done was to give us a little bit of cash-on-hand situation. I would not want to say that the State board was not involved, because they did provide a young lady—I'm not sure what her name was—but she was at many of the meetings and would bring back interpretations or would bring back some legal opinions. I think she was helpful. But again, I would say people out here in the rural areas, you know, we don't trust the politician in Springfield, mainly because we see the politician in Springfield as groveling at the feet of Chicago and Chicago politicians. We see their main job as getting elected. And so the real key to every single one of the successful convergences, consolidations and so on in this area, in my mind, is the ROEs. And you know, they are such a terrific resource for local school districts, for local school boards, that we just could not have gotten this job done without the ROEs.

Pogue: Was there any assistance from your local legislators?

Clifton: I'm going to kinda quote John Kerry on the Iraq war, "I was for it, before I was against it," and I would say yeah, they were for it. But I don't really see anything positive. We're a school district with four hundred and seventy-five unhoused students. We don't have a building of our own. We lease facilities from the Carthage high school. We have kids in mobile buildings. You know, we just simply don't have the facilities that we need, and we're not getting a lot of support. I noticed with, I guess, anger, here last Wednesday that we're going to build a sixty-eight million dollar fine arts and oral interpretation something over at Western Illinois. I'm glad that they're getting the building, but you know, it sure would have helped if they kicked loose with some local funding here.

Pogue: Were there any other people that played a critical role? You talked about the district superintendents, the regional office...

Clifton: Up to the point where Illini West started?

Pogue: Yes.

Clifton: I would say probably the two newspapers played a very crucial role. That would be *The Quill* in Henderson and *The Hancock County Journal*. I'm not sure we ever knew where they stood, but the amount of publicity they gave us, the support they gave us at meetings and so on, was just invaluable.

Pogue: Were there any editorials from the local media about the merger?

Clifton: I would have to say there was. I can't address any specifically. I do not ever remember seeing anything negative, no negative editorial or publicity. Even the, the hmm (pen clicking) the farmers' group, I'm not sure what they're called. But we didn't have any organized opposition at all.

Pogue: What were some of the advantages that were listed for the reorganization during the referendum campaign?

Clifton: Okay, mostly it was increases in curriculum. We were going to be able to offer a stronger and a more versatile curriculum. We were going to be able to offer increased and, perhaps more, specific vocational educational training.

Pogue: (starts to talk inaudibly)

Clifton: I'm sorry. Those people in the Dallas City area were very, very excited about getting into a football program, which we did not have in that area. I think that was somewhat of a draw. But I don't think, overall, athletics played a great deal.

Pogue: For maybe La Harpe and Carthage, when you say increased curriculum, did that give them more courses to select? Was there a major change for Carthage, in what was available?

Clifton: I'm not sure there was a major change, but they could look at what was going to be happening in the next five years, and they could see that there were going to be major negative changes if something like this did not occur.

Pogue: As far as concerns on the reorganization during the referendum, you talked about maybe the distance, or some apprehension from the smaller districts. Were there other issues of concern?

Clifton: I think there were, of course, some people that were looking at athletic programs and would say, "Well, my kid is the fifth best basketball player and now he's going out there, and he's going to be the fifteenth best and he's going to lose playing time." I think that was probably a little of the problem. As I had mentioned earlier, there's always a fear of an outlying community moving into the county seat area, becoming absorbed and losing your identity. That was a concern I think in La Harpe and Dallas City both.

Pogue: As to the planning, you got involved then. Were you involved in November of 2006?

Clifton: Yes.

Pogue: And so you had to deal with a lot of issues, and some of these involved salary schedules, teacher contracts, teacher assignment, school name, colors, mascots, school songs, sports, conference affiliation, transportation, the curriculum offering, staffing of support, hiring superintendent, disposition of or what you're going to do about the class pictures, trophies, uniforms, graduation requirements, school day length, textbooks, course description, board policy, health insurance, what banks would be involved, busing, activity funds. How did you tackle all those?

Clifton: You know, the interesting thing was that we had a list very similar to this. It might have been more or less inclusive, but as we were interviewing superintendents, we would hand them the list. Several of the candidates just threw up their arms, their hands, and said, you know, "I don't think I can do this. Not in this short a time." It's kind of like bringing a baby into the world, particularly your first one. People tell you what you have to do, but you really don't understand it until that baby gets there. I'm sure a lot of us didn't understand what was involved in creating this new district.

You know, I would have to say that, after probably the second month of meetings once we had an interim superintendent, if you had asked any of us if we were going to have a successful first day, there wouldn't have been very many of us that held out a lot of hope. But, you know, we got Harold Ford as our interim superintendent that just did yeomen's service, did so much work behind the scenes and under the scenes and in front of the scenes. We hired Mike Mauzy as our first superintendent. And we hired Ray Driscoll as a high school principal. I'm sure that the three of these people aged probably four, five, or six years that first six months. But when that first day of school was over, and the kids had all been delivered

home, we got together unofficially. You know, we only had one problem the whole day, and that was we had one bus break down taking kids home from school. Kids were picked up, they were delivered to school. We had text books for every school, for every student. Every student had a class. The bells worked. The lunch was there. Football started at 3:20. You know, you just could not have hoped for a better starting day. And the three people, Harold Ford, Mike Mauzy, and Ray Driscoll, out front.

But there were lots of people—I don't even want to start mentioning names—but there was lots of people, from that November election to the first day of school, that made this whole thing possible. You know, we saw signs, and I guess maybe the slogan of the school at this time was "three schools, one dream." I'm not sure many of us didn't think it wasn't going to be one nightmare, but it turned into a fantastic dream!

And I would add, although I don't like to add one more person simply because he's currently in the mix, but our school board president, who is also the leader of the Committee of Ten and had been our school board president, Tracy. Tracy Anders, has done just a remarkable amount of work to put this thing together. And the two regional superintendents of schools. This really was their baby, and there's not a one of us that could be any more proud.

Pogue: Of the list that we talked about, which were the most difficult to deal with?

Clifton: Without a single doubt, it was the trophies. And it's still the trophies. What to do with the trophies? You know, we are Illini West Chargers, and we're not the Blue Girls and we're not the Blue Boys.

Pogue: How did they get their name, Chargers?

Clifton: This was turned over to the students, and the students came up with the name through research and actual voting. The students came up with all of this, made recommendations to the board. The logo was actually a contest, which the art students came up with, and the art department. Not the art department, an art student came up with a logo for the Chargers. The colors were voted on once, and then the board rejected the colors, and we came up with the blue and the orange and the white. And you know it was a long drawn out process. Probably the most contentious of anything that we came up with—the school colors, the Charger name, and the trophies.

Pogue: What were perhaps easier than you thought they would be?

Clifton: Transportation. Again, what were then the three elementary districts made that transportation issue almost a non-issue the first day of school.

Pogue: How was teacher assignment determined, because you said you went from three districts to four districts? How did you decide who was coming into the new high

school and where openings would have to exist and what people would be staying with the elementary districts?

Clifton: The Committee of Ten and the new Illini West school board pledged that the new staff at the high school would be taken from the two existing high schools. Now, fortunately, we only had the two staff, one at La Harpe and one at Carthage. The Dallas City one had been deactivated and gone to Nauvoo. So we only had, I think, two teachers at Nauvoo that were still part of the Dallas City staff by contract. So those people were given guarantees that they would have positions. They were granted the tenure that they had in the existing districts.

Let's take La Harpe's teachers. The La Harpe teachers, if they were certified in elementary or junior high and high school, could choose whether they wanted to stay with the elementary district or transfer to the high school district. And so, you know, there was some time for those decisions to be made. Actually, the first year, the teacher assignment was curriculum driven; the curriculum was driven more by the teachers that we had, as opposed to what we really wanted in the long run.

Pogue: As for the building itself, you're using the Carthage high school for Illini West?

Clifton: Yes. We're using part of the Carthage high school, and we also have (counts to self), I believe we have eight mobile classrooms.

Pogue: And who technically owns the portion of the high school you use?

Clifton: The high school, the so-called "high school building," is owned by Carthage elementary. The mobile classrooms are held, owned, or leased by Illini West and placed on Carthage elementary ground. Illini West does not own any buildings of any kind. And the Carthage elementary district, they're not leasing the building to the Illini West, they're only charging us actual costs. So it's a very advantageous situation, but it's still somebody else's building.

Pogue: So for the listener, in the complex that Illini West stands, there are how many different grade levels functioning?

Clifton: Okay, I believe they have a pre-Kindergarten through grade five in one wing, and then the existing Carthage high school. Then there's a new addition in which we have several buildings, or several rooms. Then we have four mobile buildings, each of those with two classrooms. There is a football field and a practice football field and a track. And the parking lots that all belong to the elementary school.

Pogue: As far as setting up a salary schedule and collective bargaining agreement, how did that work?

Clifton: We negotiated a new teaching contract over the period of a summer. We more or less improved the Carthage elementary salary schedule, which was the best, and offered that to our teachers. We also then negotiated with the non-certified union.

Pogue: What employees make up the Illini West support service group?

Clifton: Secretaries. Aids. Bus drivers. (long pause) And lunchroom personnel.

Pogue: So are the buses owned by Illini West or are they...

Clifton: Okay, we're in a hybrid situation. We own buses which in most cases provide extracurricular transportation. We own two white buses for small trips. Most of the busing of students, from beginning of school to when the kids are taken home, belong to the elementary schools.

Pogue: As far as board policies, were the policies adopted by Illini West similar to the other three?

Clifton: I have not seen the other three, but I'm assuming that, since most of ours were adopted or abridged or amended from the Illinois School Board Association policy book, that they all have a great deal of similarity.

Pogue: Did you stay fairly on schedule from November, trying to meet all these requirements to be ready on July 1?

Clifton: I would say yes we did, and totally credit that to Harold Ford and Tracy Anders.

Pogue: What experience did the new Illini West school board have? Were these people that had been on boards before?

Clifton: I believe that six of the seven Illini West board members had previously been or were on the existing the unit boards. The sole exception would be myself. And I had been a superintendent of schools, administrator, but had never had board experience.

Pogue: Are the board members selected by geography, at-large? Or how was that determined?

Clifton: The boundaries of each of the existing elementary districts becomes a ward, so to speak. So there are two board members that are guaranteed to be elected from the Dallas City Elementary School, two from the La Harpe Elementary School, two from the Carthage school, and one elected at-large.

Pogue: How many candidates were there for the new school board?

Clifton: (laughing) There were eight. Each of the elementary schools had two, so they were running uncontested. The at-large had three. In the elections previously, there had

been nobody run, no one new ran. We finally, at this last election, had the at-large seat and there were two candidates for that.

Pogue: So if a board member—let's say from Illini West—that lives in Dallas City resigns, would the replacement come from Dallas City?

Clifton: Yes, it would have to come from the Dallas City elementary district.

Pogue: What relationships now exist with the new elementary districts? It sounds like there has to be pretty good coordination with Carthage, because of all the sharing.

Clifton: Again, you know, I would credit Ray Driscoll with the history that he formed with the elementary district from the very beginning. And our new principal, Brad Gooding, has continued that. The administrators have monthly working meetings, where they discuss various mutual problems. The principal, Ray in the past and Brad now, and the teachers from the elementary and the high school, particularly the junior high portions and the high school, meet on a regular basis. I think it's three, maybe four, times a year to discuss mutual problems.

Pogue: What incentives did the state provide to the district? To the new Illini West district or to any of the three remaining elementary?

Clifton: The Illini West district got some financial, teacher differential funds. And there was some incentive money for each of the districts. That has come in late, but I think that money has arrived, and this is the last year. It was to be paid over three years, and this is the last year of that funding. And so after this year there will be no financial incentive.

Pogue: What are the long-term challenges for the four districts?

(long pause)

Clifton: Well, I think, in my mind, the most important is the direction which No Child Left Behind legislation review and revision is going to take. If the current path is followed on No Child Left Behind, where everything is going to be test and data driven, where everything requires data and, you know, proof of student success, then I think that's going to be a major problem. I think teacher certification, getting qualified and willing teachers to teach in the rural areas, is going to be a problem. (Pause) And I think distance. You know, right now our busing schedule depends upon the elementary districts. Of course they want to get their students home at a proper time, which then requires us to have a very limited and restricted day. We can have eight periods of forty-three minutes. As an old-time principal and superintendent, I don't know how teachers, particularly or specifically in a non-lab course – Chemistry, Mathematics, Home Economics, Electrical, or that sort of thing – how they get anything done in a forty-three minute period. But that's what we're requiring. The teachers are doing, again, yeomen service, but it just can't last too much longer. So I think time, within the curriculum, and distance traveling are

challenges. (Pause) I mean when we first started, gasoline or fuel oil was a dollar seventy a gallon, and it's four dollars and twenty cents today.

Pogue: Now you talked about the kind of guarantee for the teaching staff, that they would have some sort of position, whether it be in Illini West or the three elementary. How about for the administrative staff?

Clifton: I do not believe that there was any such promise.

Pogue: And were there administrative positions that were lost because of this, or did the net four districts actually have a gain of administrators?

Clifton: In essence, I think there was only one principal added. La Harpe and Dallas City have joined together and they have one superintendent for the two elementary schools. They have two principals; Illini West has a principal and assistant principal and a superintendent. And Carthage I believe has the same administrators that they had before, a superintendent and two building principals. So if there was any addition it was that the one high school principal's position. Now, Illini West hired Ray Driscoll, who was the Carthage High School principal. We did not take him on. He was forced to apply, was interviewed and selected. Along with the employment of Harold Ford as interim and Mike as the superintendent, and I'm speaking of myself included, this was probably the wisest move that was made. You know, this was just a perfect, smooth transition from the Carthage High School Blue Girl, Blue Boy to the Carthage Charger. I'm sorry, the Illini West Charger. Ray just did a fantastic job of making sure that everything was starting from July first. I mean, to me, anything that he came out with, I never heard the man refer to, "Well, this is the way we did it when I was in Carthage" or "This is the way the Blue Girls did it." You know, it was just like we went out some place fifty miles away and started a new school. I mean, we couldn't have asked for a smoother, better team.

Pogue: How is the reorganization functioning now, after three years, by the public and students?

Clifton: You know, I have to admit it, it probably would have been different with the exception that Illini West now is the proud holder of three state championship trophies. So we've got a trophy room of our own. The boosters club and the band boosters started at the very first, July one, making sure they were bringing in Dallas City, La Harpe band players, cheerleaders. The group that really did the leg work for the unifying of the students was the athletic groups. Every single coach, every single group sponsor, just started as if it was a brand new organization. Carthage kids, even though it was a Carthage building, they didn't get first crack at everything. I think that is still in place. The problem is always out there, it's always just over the horizon, but our people keep a good eye on it and, they do a good job.

Pogue: Have any other districts talked to Illini West about this type of reorganization strategy, since you were the first to use it?

Clifton: I do not think we have been approached. To my knowledge, we have not.

Pogue: What recommendations would you give state legislators, the governor, State Board of Education, related to school reorganization, especially now that there's new talk of it, because Governor Quinn included it in the budget? There's been at least three bills that were submitted tied to school reorganization, one calling for a commission to make recommendations to the governor. And it would be chaired by the lieutenant governor. Another one is talking about a county-wide school system, and another one that was going to give the state board full authority to implement reorganization.

Clifton: Really, you know, it's kind of like, what's the best business pattern? And that's location, location, location. I would say, first and foremost, don't touch the ROEs. They are tremendous assets to local consolidation efforts. They are the only elected, believable person within the whole educational system, here in the rural areas, that we have a great deal of faith in.

Second, there has to be money for building. Building and remodeling. We talk about consolidation: if you're going to consolidate for the purpose of losing administrators, it's never going to work. Consolidation *has* to be for the benefit of improving curriculum. To me the greatest—I don't want to say enemy—but the greatest challenge that we have is China. The strength of numbers that they have, you know.

You can't put a Cadillac body in a Prius car of some kind, and you can't put a twenty-first century school in a school that was built fifty years ago. Technology, we've got wires running here and wires running there. You know, we're having to air condition areas where our servers are. It's just impossible. If you're going to have a twenty-first century school system, you need a twenty-first century building. So give us the money to build the buildings. Give us the REOs, and let them become like Mr. Meixner has his, as a tool for educational improvement.

Then forget this business of cutting back transportation. You can't increase the size, the amount of traveling, and decrease the financial ability. It just does not work.

And you know, all of the consolidation you want can take place, but it has to take place locally. Although there has to be a strong mandate, you know. I'm speaking for myself, and I'm probably the only one on the board that would, but I'm kind of really attracted to the county-wide school and the requirement that, if you are a feeder elementary school, more than two, we're going to put you in the unit district. It is cumbersome to have three elementary schools in one unit district, or one high school district. To me it would work so much better. But that part isn't going to be done locally. (laughs) It's going to have to have a club over somebody's head to do it.

Pogue: In 1985, the state last push required county-wide hearings to encourage creating high schools of at least five hundred students, and you indicated that Hancock County had gone through some consolidation prior to the one in 2006. What do you remember about that 1985 experience?

Clifton: Well, I was a superintendent at that time, and I can remember when there were eight high schools here. And as local superintendents, most of us was sitting back hoping that the legislature had the guts to put teeth in it, because we all realized that we weren't going to do it locally. But it had to be done. And it's going to have to be done. The impetus is going to have to come from above. But it does, it has to be done. The idea back then was a great idea. I mean, it would have forced us, in effect, to probably have two high schools here in Hancock County. And by this time, if we'd had two in Hancock County, then we'd have been down to one, which is what it should be anyway. In Illini West, we're just about traveling the full distance (laughing) of the county anyway.

Pogue: Do the current four districts have any viewpoint toward these new bills and the governor's call for fewer school districts? Have they taken any official...

Clifton: (talking over Pogue) I don't think they've taken any official action at all. Our superintendent has gotten word to board members about the, uh, forced mergence of the elementary school and the high school. I have not seen any official action on that particular bill. I just think that we sit here... You know, back in eight-five we were called "Forgottonia," and I think they've forgot where Forgottonia is. You know, we don't a have a lot of say or sway. We'll get along. We always have.

Pogue: Well, is there anything else you would like to leave us with on the new creation of Illini West and the reforming of the three K-12 units into three elementary districts?

(long pause)

Clifton: No. I think I've said more than I have a right to say, so I'm done.

Pogue: Well, I want to thank Robert Clifton for being with us today and explaining this conversion format that impacted the communities of Dallas City, La Harpe, and Carthage. Thank you very much.

Clifton: Thank you. It's been an honor, sir.